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Chapter II

WHILE THE RIVER WAS HIGH

I

501 313 NOW this was a busy time of the year, and the river so full of canoes that a man floating down a lumber raft to the railhead might expect to meet ten or twelve dugouts in a day.

• 221 Men in laden corials were returning from the French side for the harvest festivals. They had been away eighteen months or longer, and now they were coming back to burn new rice and cassava fields for their women, and to beget new children. When the harvesting was done was a fine time for love, and a woman with a child in her womb was the very luckiest for planting a field. These returning men, in the prime of life, with powerful bodies and muscles that were as so many great snakes coiling and uncoiling underneath the gleaming moist skins were deferential toward strangers. For it would have been unseemly to thrust at the first comer their adventures on the Marowyne River, and a man who was returning with many possessions had to exercise particular care that he angered neither men nor gods. Yet among themselves they could not keep from a certain amount of swagger.

"Ai ba! Ai mati!" they exclaimed to each other in reply to the most casual comment. "Indeed, brother! Yes, friend!" This was no more than the mode of address of the [576] Awka people who live along the Marowyne, but "Ai ba! Ai mati!" stood for the password of the larger outside

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world, and they flung it at each other proudly, for it stood for the experience of making their way among strangers and earning sums with which to fill a large corial, and much else.

The men who had remained on the river found special pleasure in imparting to these returning ones some weighty gossip.

"At Gankwe they are burying Sedefo's younger brother," they said as the boats passed each other, and they went into the details of Zimbi's death and the kunu which was decimating the family.

"Asikanu has been charged with adultery by Matafo. Asikanu's family is offering a great fine, but it is far from settled yet."

All this was by way of preface. To come to the real news without casual preliminaries would have been the way of a child, but a Man Nengere, a full-grown Negro, knew better.

"Last year a white man came here with another one—a doctor. He said he would come back with his wife. He has brought his wife. He says they are going up the river. He says they are going to the Granman's country."

Up and down the great stretches of water as the boats passed each other, the news was given. Word and conjecture floated down river and into the creeks, reaching even the lower river Awka villages.

"The Bakra told me Awka is an African word. There is a place in Africa called Awka, and a people in Africa called Awka people. He knows Africa!"

"Kye, ba! Kye, mati!"

Word and conjecture were carried up river in the boats which were being poled upstream against the rapids. It would be some time yet before there would be legends, and songs about the American whites who had made their way into this bush. Now there could only be talk. The Bakra had a machine which talked back to you, if you talked into its horn, and when it talked back, it said the same thing you did, sang back the same song, and if you laughed, it laughed, too.

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ON THE SARAMACCA RIVER

Seeing him, our host gave an exclamation of pleasure. "But this is Ajako, the husband of Granman Yankuso's daughter!"

"*Kuma, Bakra. Kuma, Bakra muye*—Good morning, white man, good morning, white woman," he said, and our answer was, "*Ajako, kuma*—Ajako, good morning."

Had we awakened, no? This, in the Saramacca idiom, was how one asked if we were well, if we were alive, since the euphemism for death is sleep. We answered him in their patterned phrase.

"*Hafu so*," we said, using their equivalent for fairly well, only half so.

Ajako laughed. The white man had learned. "Are you no better? I hear the gods like you well," he replied.

And so the conversation went on, each giving account of himself.

Finally Ajako said, "Granman Yankuso waits for you, Bakra. He sends you his greetings, and says he will welcome you in Asindopo Lantiwe, his village. You have the freedom of the river. The village chiefs know of your coming. They will receive you. The river is not too high now, for top-side the rains are at an end. Here on the lower river, too, rocks that today are under water will appear tomorrow or the next day. The water is not too high now. The Granman sends word to you that you can start."

But what of him? Would he not come with us as our chief paddler, to show us the way through the many channels? But he smiled and said he was going to the Marowyne. He could not turn back, he told us, for he had the boats to sell, and money to earn there, while his wife was nursing her infant. When the child was seventeen, eighteen months old, then he would be back with his wife again, cutting new fields for her, and making children. While the infant was at the breast, he would be away working.

There was more talk, leading gently—*safri*, softly, as the Bush Negro himself says—to the subject of certain unfriendly villages. There were two of them up the river that

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This they had learned from the whites long ago, and now everywhere on the river compasses were seen, or carvings which showed their use. The machete, the small sharp knives which lay about here on the work-table, the compass, and sand made up any Bush Negro carver's tools. But here at Ma'lobbi in this workshop of the captain were tools from the white man's city, collected by himself on his journeys down to the government office to receive his yearly allowance, or by his men who had been to the French shore and learned of the ways of the outside world. There was a plane to make the blade of a paddle smooth as the skin of a child, and there were two others in addition to this one, we were assured, in the treasure house of the upper story. Hammers, too, were useful for making boats, and even for smaller carvings like benches. There was also a bit and auger, though we were never convinced that the captain himself had ever put it to its more prosaic uses.

"I have many more up there," said the captain, pointing to the upper story. "I like them. If a man likes his tools, then they help him in his carvings. As he sees with his eyes, so they cut. I have always liked my tools, white man. I have spent much time with them."

A young man sat to one side shaving down a block of wood with a knife which he held.

"He is not carving," the captain said, following our eyes. "He is making a piece for this," he explained, indicating a plane. "Now is not the time for carving. There is too much to be done. This is the time for cutting wood, for taking the rafts down the river, for making boats, for bleeding rubber trees for the white man, and for hunting game. When the great rains come, then men sit about and carve."

As he spoke our eyes traveled to the various carvings which stood about the workshop. In one corner leaned a paddle which caught our attention because of its darkened color, and the patina which long use had given it, so that it seemed made of ebony. Against another wall were several stools, all richly ornamented with carvings, while beside us,

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121 The agriculture of the Bush Negroes, however, has become
[241] a matter which urgently demands the attention of the administration as a result of the wasteful use of land. Until now little attention has been paid to this, but if one wants to develop the interior of Surinam, this problem will also have to be looked into.

101 The data provided here throw light upon the agriculture of
121 the Paramaccaners and the Aucaners on the Marowijne and the
[103] Tapanahoni. They were gathered during the above-mentioned medical expedition and during a trip to the Tapanahoni in October, 1952. The facts thus refer primarily to the Marowijne, but in general they are certainly also valid for the other rivers along
121 which the Bush Negroes live. It is a typically Surinam problem,
648 connected with the circumstance that the Bush Negroes have worked in the deep interior in the same fashion for hundreds of years, independent of the life in the civilized coastal region and almost completely outside the sphere of interest of the government.

2. The Grounds System

241 For the planting of agricultural crops the Bush Negro lays out little so-called food grounds. One is to understand by this
[311] cleared pieces of ground in the virgin forest on which the crops are cultivated. The grounds lie along the rivers on higher flat lands, mostly terraces that are not submerged during high water or, in the absence of such terrain, on the slopes of hills. They are more or less circular and have a surface area of a half to one and a half hectares.

241 During the long dry season (October, November) the men
● 221 clear the grounds. Two to three weeks thereafter the forest that
132 has been felled is burned; the smaller branches are cleared away,
462 but the trunks are left lying. The ground is not worked. As soon as the rains of the short rainy season begin, they start to plant and sow. This planting time falls in December and January. The wives of the Bush Negroes (for only the women do the further work) now plant all kinds of crops at the same time on one and the same ground.

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241 the same ground. The crops are thus scattered higgledy-piggledy
● 221 or at best are arranged in little patches. The harvest periods of these crops have a certain sequence. Two groups are to be differentiated, namely, (1st) the rapidly growing "annual" crops, and (2nd) the perennial crops, which grow more slowly.

/137/ To the first belong:

maize, is harvested after three months (in February and March);
watermelon, idem;
okra, produces edible fruit in three months (February, March) and still for a time after that;
pumpkin, gives ripe fruit in four months (April) and thereafter;
pinda /peanut/ and ogobo, blooms after three months (February, March) and supplies produce after five months (May, June);
bongila, idem;
tobacco, is ripe for picking after 4-5 months, blooms after 7 months;
rice, is ripe after 4-5 months (May-July).

To the second category belong the perennial crops:

sugar cane, is cut already after 5-6 months, but the stools are kept up to two years and longer;
cassava, the tubers are harvested after 7 months and longer;
tajer, napi, yams, and patatas, are harvested (aside from exceptions; see separate list) after 8 to 10 months (August to November), but also continuously thereafter;
pineapple, is ripe after 9 months;
bacove, ripe fruit after 10 months, the stools are kept;
bananas, harvested after 10 to 12 months continuously after that from the new stools.

241 The advantage of this method of planting is that the grounds supply something during the entire year. A disadvantage, however, is that new grounds must be laid out each year. In this manner, various grounds are always in use for a household /gezin/. In the first year the ground supplies above all the products that grow most rapidly and some perennial crops; in the second year one harvests principally cassava, bacove, bananas,